DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 162 586 HE 010 686

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TITLE Age as a Selection Characteristic for Law School Admission.
PUB DATE 31 Mar 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Canada, Mary 27-31, 1978); The study was supported by a fellowship from the Educational Testing Service; Data were provided by the Law School Admission Council

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Admission Criteria; *Age; Competitive Selection; Decision Making; Ethnic Groups; Grade Point Average; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Law Schools; Models; Professional Education; Statistical Data; *Student Application; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Age Discrimination; *Law Students

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine whether age is one characteristic used by law schools in selecting applicants. Data were obtained on 76,061 registrants for the 1975-76 law school application year. Constraints of the analyses reduced the sample to 43,180. An explanatory model of decision-making in the law school admissions process was formulated in an attempt to understand the process and the direct effects of an applicant's ethnic identity, family income, average Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score, age, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), and sex on admission. The linear relationships among the variables were decomposed and analyzed through a series of successive regression analyses. Age, sex, and family income had virtually no effect on law school admission while ethnic identity, the average LSAT score, and undergraduate GPA had substantial direct effects. (Author/SW)

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ED162586

AGE AS A SELECTION CHARACTERISTIC FOR LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION

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Abstract

Within the past two decades competition for admission to graduate and professional schools has increased dramatically. Admission committees are now faced with the difficult task of having far too many candidates relative to the number of available seats. The purpose of this study was to examine whether age is one characteristic used by law schools in selecting applicants.

Data were obtained on 76,061 registrants for the 1975-76 law school application year who had valid application credentials. However, constraints of the analyses used in this study reduced the sample to 43,180. An explanatory model of decision-making in the law school admissions process was formulated in an attempt to understand the admissions process more fully and the direct effects of an applicant's ethnic identity, family income, average Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score, age, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), and sex on admission to law school sere examined. After the model was formulated, the linear relationships among the variables were decomposed and analyzed. This was accomplished through a series of successive regression analyses.

Results showed that age as well as sex and family income had virtually no effect on law school admission while ethnic identity, the average LSAT score, and undergraduate GPA had substantial direct effects.

Session # 26.18

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HE 010 686

Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Canada, March 27-31, 1978. This study was made possible by data provided by the Law School Admission Council and by fellowship support provided by Educational Testing Service. Views expressed are the sole responsibility of the author.

Printed in the United States.

AGE AS A SELECTION CHARACTERISTIC FOR LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION

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Within the past two decades competition for admission to graduate and professional schools has increased dramatically. Admission committees are now faced with the difficult task of having far too many candidates relative to the number of available seats. Undoubtedly there are a select few on whom decisions can readily be made. Within any pool of applicants there is always a limited number whose credentials are so outstanding that the individuals are admitted without question; likewise, there is always a limited number whose credentials are so poor that the individuals are disqualified immediately. However, the problem facing admission committees is how to select a limited number of candidates from the remaining large pool of qualified applicants.

Since the late 1960's and the advent of affirmative action programs, minority status has been one characteristic considered by schools when admitting candidates. These preferential programs are designed to ameliorate the effect of past discriminatory practices against minority groups. The programs are based on a policy which grants higher rates of acceptance to minority students than to their non-minority student peers, despite the fact that both groups have equal admission test scores and grade point averages (GPAs). This is not to imply, however, that the minority applicants who are admitted are unqualified.

Nevertheless, the procedure of giving preferential treatment to certain groups of applicants is not without controversy (Ackley, 1974; Nagel, 1973; Strike, 1976; Thomson, 1973). A case involving "reverse discrimination" is now pending

before the United States Supreme Court. Allan Bakke, a white male, is claiming that his constitutional rights were violated when he was denied admission to the medical school at the University of California at Davis because of a special minority program which gave preferential treatment to applicants on the basis of race. It is Bakke's assertion that his test scores and undergraduate achievement record were as good as, if not better than, the credentials of some of the minority students who were admitted (Regents of California v. Allan Bakke). At issue, then, is whether schools have the right to select students specifically on the basis of their minority status, despite the fact that their admission test scores and undergraduate GPAs are lower than those of rejected majority status applicants.

One contention of the institutions is that they are attempting to obtain a diverse body of candidates (Porcelli v. Titus, 1970; Strike, 1976; Thomson, 1973). By such an action they hope to prepare their students to work in the pluralistic society in which we live by allowing them to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds. There is also the consideration of providing desirable role models for students in the society at large who aspire to graduate or professional training. If, therefore, it can be shown that institutions give preferential treatment to students on the basis of various status characteristics, then it seems plausible to argue that schools are indeed making a concerted effort to obtain a heterogeneous student population.

Three status characteristics that are of particular interest to a study of admission policies are age, race, and sex. Previous research has already examined the influence of race and sex on admission to the nation's law schools (Evans, 1977). It was found that, based on undergraduate GPAs and LSAT scores, admission committees do give preferential treatment to racial minority applicants, although they do not give preferential treatment to applicants on the basis of their sex.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine whether age is a characteristic used by law schools in selecting applicants. Specifically, it will be determined whether older applicants are accepted at higher rates than applicants who apply within one year of college graduation. If older applicants are found to receive preferential treatment, it is assumed to be a result of such factors as the experience they obtained since graduating from college or an offset to the presumed grade inflation trend. It is not expected that schools are interested in older applicants because of their age per se.

Method

Subjects

The data for this study were used with the permission of the Law School Admissions Council which administers the LSAT in cooperation with Educational Testing Service. At the beginning of the 1975-76 law school application year, all of the 157 law schools in the country accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA) required an LSAT score of all applicants. Of those 157 schools, 146 also required their applicants to register for the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS). This service provides schools with a report for each applicant that includes LSAT scores, a standardized undergraduate transcript analysis, and limited biographical data.

There were 76,061 registrants for the 1975-76 law school application year who had a valid LSAT score, supplied the required college transcript(s), and requested that their scores be sent to at least one of the 146 ABA accredited law schools that required participation in the LSDAS. However, due to the constraint of the analyses described below, the data for this study were based on 43,180 applicants.

Procedure

An explanatory model of decision-making in the law school admissions process was formulated in an attempt to understand the admissions process more fully. In particular, the direct effects of an applicant's ethnic identity, family income, average LSAT score, age, undergraduate GPA, and sex on admission to law school were examined. This model had the advantage of specifically examining the influence of age on law school admissions, the primary focus of this paper. It had the further advantage of more fully and accurately representing the law school admissions process by including the influence of other relevant variables. Concomitantly, there was the opportunity to re-examine with a more realistic model the findings of Evans (1977) regarding the influence of race and sex on admission to law school.

In simulating law school admission procedures, the model depicted in Figure 1 was formulated. In this model straight uni-directional lines indicate a

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Insert Figure 1 here
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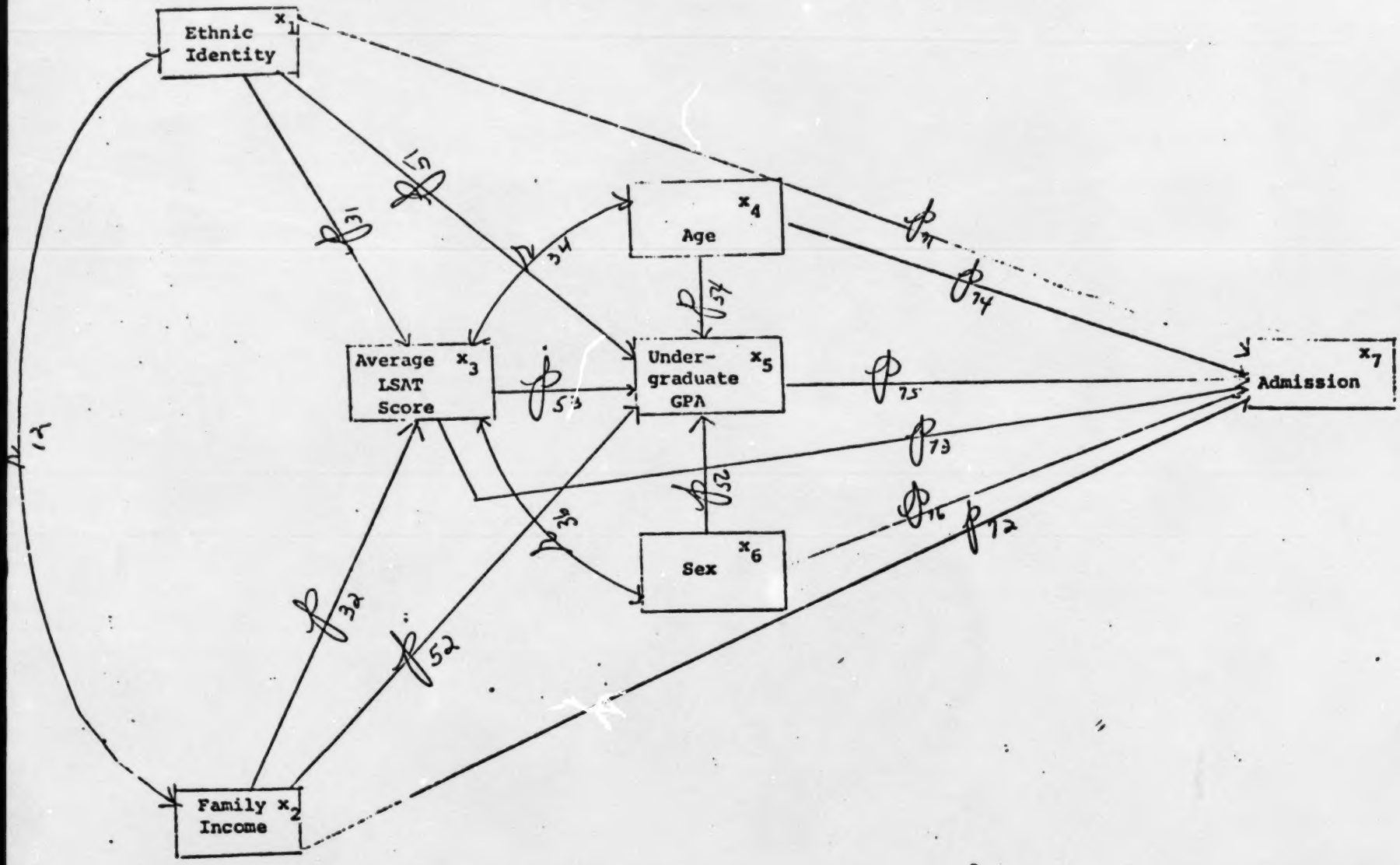
one-way influence of certain variables on other given variables. For example, it is assumed that ethnic identity has some influence on the average LSAT score of an applicant while the average LSAT score is not assumed to have any influence on the applicant's ethnic identity. By contrast, curved double-headed arrows indicate that no attempt is made in the model to explain the influence of any two variables on each other and thus the relationship remains unanalyzed. For example, it is not postulated that the average LSAT score influences an applicant's sex or that an applicant's sex influences the average LSAT score obtained. It may seem unusual to the reader that in Figure 1 the average LSAT score is assumed to influence the undergraduate GPA, especially when the GPA is temporarily prior to the LSAT score.

Figure 1

Simulation of the Law School Admission Process



The rationale is that the LSAT is assumed to be an ability measure and the construct of ability is assumed to influence undergraduate achievement.

After the model was formulated, the linear relationships among the variables in the model were decomposed and analyzed. This was accomplished through a series of successive regression analyses. That is, the applicant's average LSAT score was first regressed on ethnic identity and family income. Next undergraduate GPA was regressed on ethnic identity, family income, average LSAT score, age, and sex. Finally, the criterion variable of law school admission was regressed on the other six variables included in the analysis, i.e., ethnic identity, income, average LSAT score, age, sex, and undergraduate GPA. Thus, at each stage a given variable was regressed on those variables hypothesized to have a prior influence. In these analyses age was determined as of September 1, 1976, sex was coded as 0 for males and 1 for females, and ethnic identity was coded as 0 for whites and 1 for all racial minorities included in the analyses.

On the basis of the regression analyses which were performed, path coefficients were then obtained in order to yield the direct effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variables. When the variables in the simulation model are expressed in standardized form, the path coefficients are equal to the standard regression coefficients (β's) obtained in ordinary regression analysis. Wright (1934) has defined these path coefficients or standardized regression coefficients as the fraction of the standard deviation of the dependent variable for which the given independent variable is directly responsible. Thus, path coefficients are taken to represent the direct effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variables. These are indicated in Figure 1 by the coefficient p with two subscripts, the first indicating the dependent variable and the second indicating the independent variable.

In considering these analyses two points should be noted. First, the reliability of the LSAT, estimated through an internal consistency approach, was found to be .92 and the average reliability of the undergraduate GPA, estimated on the basis of three successive grading periods, was found to be .84. These reliability estimates were taken into account by correcting the regression analyses for attenuation, i.e., correcting the regression analyses for error due to the unreliability of the instruments used. The correction resulted in observed regression weights which more nearly approximated the true regression weights.

The second point to consider is that in order to be included in the present analyses, applicants had to have indicated on the LSDAS questionnaire that their racial or ethnic identity was either white, black, Chicano, Puerto Rican or American Indian. Any applicants who omitted this question, or indicated that they were of some other ethnic identity were deleted from the analyses reported here. Also, an admission decision of either acceptance or rejection had to be recorded on each applicant. Candidates on whom law schools failed to return such information were also deleted from the present analyses. This criterion of no missing data on either the ethnic identity or admission variable was the factor which reduced the data pool from an original sample size of 76,061 to 43,180. For the remaining five variables included in the model, the intercorrelations and subsequent regressions were estimated from the correlations computed on all subjects for whom any pair of variables was present.

Results

In Table 1 the obtained path coefficients and multiple correlation coefficients are shown. As can be seen, age as well as sex and family income were found to have

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1

Direct effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variables

Explanatory Variable	Dependent Variables
	LSAT (R^2=.21)
Ethnic identity	-.39
Family income	-.14
	Undergraduate GPA (R^2=.28)
Ethnic identity	-.08
Income	.01
Average LSAT score	.35
Age	-.29
Sex	.19
	Admission (R^2=.40)
Ethnic identity	.19
Income	.00
Average LSAT score	.48
Age	.00
Undergraduate GPA	.32
Sex	-.02

virtually no effect on law school admissions. However, the average LSAT score was found to have quite a large effect (.59). As expected, applicants with high test scores tended to receive acceptance to law school. Ethnic identity and undergraduate GPA were also found to have substantial direct effects on admission, although not to the same extent as the LSAT score. Racial minority status was found to facilitate admission and as with the LSAT score, applicants with high undergraduate GPAs also tended to be accepted.

The findings of this study indicate, then, that law schools are not purposefully recruiting older applicants. Further, past research has shown that admission committees do not accept females at higher rates than males in order to equalize enrollees on the basis of sex. Nevertheless, they do grant preferential treatment to racial minority candidates (Evans, 1977). These findings were corroborated by the present study. It appears, then, that the desire of law schools to obtain heterogeneous student populations is restricted to diversity only on the basis of race. It should be noted, however, that while this study has considered only the applicants' ethnic identity, family income, average LSAT score, age, undergraduate GPA, and sex law school committees probably take additional factors into account when admitting candidates.

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